Culture and Education: Problems at the Interface

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From the perspective of cross-cultural psychology, "education" is a vast domain. The term can refer to early infant socialization, to belly-dancing classes, and to the modern university. It occurs at the mother's breast, in fishing boats, and at the cobbler's last, in eighth-grade discussion groups and graduate seminars. Beginning with birth and ending with death, education–in some form–seems always with us.

THE VARIETIES OF EDUCATION

Even in the context of the most *formal* "school," other aspects of education are always present and interacting. Indeed, these little-noticed aspects are often the small stones which send the great wheel of formal education lurching from the road.

A commonly-used system of classification distinguishes among types of education according to their social organization (e.g., Scribner & Cole, 1973). The types so distinguished are (a) informal education, (b) non-institutional formal education, and (c) institutional formal education.

Informal education designates the everyday process by which children (and to a lesser extent, adults) learn to participate increasingly in their culture, without any particular place, time, personnel, or activity being set aside expressly for the purpose of teaching. A child imitating with a small broom an adult who is sweeping the floor, or one person watching another repair a car, thus storing up information about cars and their workings, would be examples.

Non-institutional formal education is a process of cultural transmission in which there are particular activities with specified personnel in designated circumstances which are expressly designed to transmit a particular body of cultural information. However, this last is usually fairly limited in scope and the occasions of transmission occupy limited time periods. Examples would be the instruction of adolescents that precedes initiation rituals in many traditional societies, or the pre-Confirmation classes run by some churches in our own.

Institutional formal education shows the characteristics mentioned above, but has the added attributes of being carried out by professional teachers operating in a graded, hierarchical system which exists continually over a long period of time, taking place in relatively permanent sites, and being responsible for the transmission of a broad spectrum of information.

It is this last type of education in which we are most interested, but within the context of formal institutional education, non-institutional and informal education can also take place. An example of the former situation would be the training of a choir group or a football squad; of the latter, the information transmission that takes place among peers when they are brought together in a formal education setting. If we take these secondary characteristics of formal education institutions into account and also keep in mind that participants in institutional formal education are, at other times, being educated in non-institutional and informal "modes," it becomes evident that institutional formal education does not exist in a vacuum and that when there are important differences between the content or processes of one mode and another, or between different aspects of the same mode, there is potential conflict.

Most issues currently of interest in the cross-cultural study of education occur at the interface of institutional formal education and other educational modes/characteristics. For example, the minority student in a multi-cultural society often finds different goals in the formal institutional school than in his informal home-culture education. Indeed, such conflicts may be found between different aspects of the school: the goals and methods of mathematics class are not the same as the education of the playground. We will devote a major portion of this paper to examining such areas of conflict, and the last section will illustrate methods of resolving these conflicts in a multi-cultural society. But before undertaking that task, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the school itself.

THE TRANS-NATIONAL CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL AND THE EFFECTS OF EDUCATION

This section concentrates on formal institutional education as it has developed in technological, literate societies. Formal institutional education can be distinguished from other kinds of education in several ways, some of which have already been mentioned. To these can be added that formal educational institutions of literate, technological societies–or "schools" as we will refer to them from this point on–tend to undertake the following functions: (a) They attempt to teach broad-based, generalizable skills, such as reading, writing, and mathematics. (b) They bear explicit responsibility for the transmission of some cultural information, such as the history of the society, scientific knowledge, community standards, and the nature of civic responsibilities. In a multi-cultural society, the cultural information usually pertains to the majority or dominant culture which operates the school. (c) Schools also bear, in a less explicit way, the burden of transmitting a large freight of cultural norms which, again, in a multi-cultural society, usually represent those of the public or dominant culture. This latter transmission is not often a formally imposed obligation, but it is felt as an implicit responsibility by instructors.

Schooling is so similar from country to country that it is best seen as a culture unto itself, a trans-national culture, the culture of the school. These similarities are present in schools' architecture, their social organization, their goals, their responsibilities, and, most especially, their personnel's adaptation to the institution. It is when the trans-national culture of the school conflicts with the recipient culture that we see the crucial current issues in culture and education.

However, the concept of a trans-national culture of the school has not yet been clearly enough formulated to allow detailed study. It is as yet no more than an hypothesis; but it is often taken as an assumption. The general inquiry into the effects of education, internationally, seems to presuppose that education in Ghana is like education in Mexico, and also like that in London. The logic of this assumption would be strengthened if it were found that education everywhere has the same effects on the student. That inquiry is unfortunately beset with methodological and conceptual problems.

The study of the cross-cultural effects of education has an odd history. Because in Western countries, age and amount of education are so highly correlated, developing intellectual capacities cannot be clearly attributed to environmental effects (education) or to maturation. To disentangle these effects, developmental and cognitive psychologists have compared the schooled versus unschooled members of many exotic cultures, in an effort to see whether the typical course of cognitive development of Western children is in fact maturational and universal, or whether it is a result of Western education; formal and informal. As a result of this enterprise, the cross-cultural educational psychologist finds a detritus of data in which schooled versus unschooled children of many cultures are compared–Liberians, Guatemalans, Soviets, Native Americans and so forth–and in order to make general statements, must assume that "school" in the African bush is in some important way equivalent to the "school" of the Yucatecan Mayan. Even

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in those exceptional studies whose purpose is to determine school effects in a particular population (for example, Cole, Sharp, & Lave, 1976), ethnographic descriptions of the schools are rarely included. In our own view, however, here is a modal tendency of schools trans-nationally, and the concept should guide research toward its clarification.

For example, many researchers have emphasized that learning in the school is characteristically "decontextualized;" that is, compared to traditional societies' teaching, school removes skill learning from those situations to which the skill is to be applied. Thus one does not learn to count beads or bags, one learns to count; rather than memorizing a list of trail markers, one learns to memorize lists. The assumption of psychologists and educators has been that this "context-free" learning produces generally applicable skills, ones which can then transfer to many contexts. Cole and Scribner and their associates have been the group most vigorously pursuing these issues, and while once sanguine for the identification of these transferable operations (Scribner & Cole, 1973), they lucidly presented the measurement pitfalls in cross-cultural comparison (Cole & Scribner, 1974): and then somewhat gloomily speculated that perhaps schooled-skills were applicable after all only to school situations (Cole, Sharp, & Lave, 1976). In the recent works of Lave (1977a; 1977b), there may be data encouraging to a more intermediate position; that is, learned skills, wherever learned, will transfer to situations which are similar enough to the context of original learning.

This position accords well with logic, and with the known laws of stimulus generalization. It also forces us to a somewhat more sophisticated view of schools; they are not to be seen as "decontextualized," but rather as being a *specific context.* If transfer is to be predicted, we must have a precise description of schools, and a precise description of to-be-transfered-to situations--in short, a taxonomy of situations, which will allow predictions of transfer according to principles of generalization.

In spite of the difficulties just discussed, we will proceed on the tentative assumption that, whatever may prove to be the details of the school-context, the general outlines are similar enough from country to country that a trans-national culture of the school is a useful working concept. We will now examine problems which arise when the school is so different from the culture of some of its children that the two conflict significantly.

PROBLEMS IN CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

Cross-cultural issues in education are of more than theoretical interest. Passions of citizens and vexations of educators are present whenever the schools of a dominant culture undertake the education of the children of a minority, whether in the United States, Nigeria, Australia, Mexico, or Guatemala.

Conflicts at the interface of schools and the populations that they serve may arise over what is to be transmitted (content), over the efficacy of transmission, or both. "What is to be transmitted" can be characterized as general skills such as reading and writing, cultural information like geography or history, or cultural norms, "working hard" or "honesty," for example. The kinds of problems that arise tend to differ according to the goal of transmission.

Goals in the areas of **general skills,** more often than goals in the other areas, tend to be explicit and to be shared by dispensing and client populations. That is to say, even minority group parents frequently favor these goals. They want their children to learn reading and arithmetic and, often, mastery of the dominant language or dialect. Conflicts and problems in this area tend to be, not over the nature of the goals, but over their implementation. Difficulties arise when schools fail to transmit effectively the general skills which they claim to teach; that is when students "fail to learn."

The second area, that of **cultural information,** is one in which the goals are usually explicit, but may well *not* be shared by client and dispensing populations. Problems may arise either because of failure to transmit effectively, or from disagreements about the appropriate cultural information to transmit. Examples of the latter would be the current conflicts in some areas of the United States between Black community members and schools over the variety of history to be taught, or the resistance of Old Order Amish parents to their children learning conventional geography, due to the supposed ill effects of such learning on important cultural norms (Hostetler & Huntington, 1971).

The third area, that of **cultural norms,** involves goals which are often neither explicit nor shared, such as competition vs. cooperation, group vs. individual achievement, expressiveness vs. reticence, etc. Difficulties which arise in this area tend to be rather subtle ones because, due to the implicit nature of the goals involved, client and dispensing populations may not clearly understand what is at issue. Again, however, the kinds of conflicts that arise can be seen as two-fold: (1) Difficulties arising over failure to transmit cultural norms effectively, and/or (2) disparities in the cultural norms which are held by the client and dispensing populations.

MINORITY ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT

While issues in all three of these areas can overlap, and difficulties in one area can contribute to problems in the others, we will limit our focus here to problems arising from failure to transmit general skills valued by both recipient and dispensing populations. In other words, we will examine the problem of minority academic underachievement.

There are two basic models that have been used in considering minority underachievement. One is the **deficiency** model, which can take many forms, from hypotheses that certain ethnic or social groups are genetically inferior (e.g., Jensen, 1969) to cultural deprivation models, which see individual capacities as equal, but posit that some cultural or social groups do not provide their children with certain essential socialization experiences. Deficiency models have been called into serious question (e.g., Keddie, 1973) and are not much in favor in the social science community today. However, they are still very much alive in the classroom, and their assumptions are often taken for granted by members of the education community and its controlling bureaucracy. They are also held by some minority group people, both parents and children. And, in their more benevolent forms, they still appear not infrequently in literature on minority underachivement.

The second model, and the one with which we will operate, is that of **cultural difference.** It takes the general position that minority underachievement results from some lack of congruence between the assumptions, norms, values, and behaviors of school personnel on the one hand; and, on the other, the assumptions, norms, values, and behaviors of minority student populations.

Different varieties of the cultural-difference model can be distinguished by the specific lack of congruence posited as the cause of the problems between school and child. On this basis, most of the major hypotheses can be viewed as falling into one of six categories; these are: (a) cultural understandings and misunderstandings; (b) motivation; (c) cognition; (d) language; (e) social organization; and (f) sociopolitical issues.

Cultural Understandings and Misunderstandings

Explanations for minority school failure which fall under this heading attribute the problem to misunderstandings between pupils and teachers arising from different culturally-based assumptions, or to misunderstandings on the part of educators about the nature of culture and cultural differences (e.g., the use of deficiency models as the bases for designing school programs). For example, Valentine (1971) suggests that schools cause minority group failure because they assume that cultural differences interfere with education and therefore attempt to wipe out such differences; Rosenfeld (1971) places part of the responsibility for slum school failure on teachers who "give up" on their pupils as unteachable, partly because they do not understand their students' culturally different social organization and motivation; and Wax and Wax (1971) attribute the inappropriacy of many educational programs designed for minority children to the use of a "vacuum" or cultural deficiency model for minority cultures.

In the Hawaiian case, previous research has demonstrated that simply educating educators about cultural differences is not by itself effective in remedying underachievement (MacDonald & Gallimore, 1971).

Motivation

Motivational explanations are those which attribute academic underachievement on the part of minority students to their failure to perform the necessary learning activities in school. Although a deficiency model may attribute such nonperformance to individual or cultural weaknesses, in the cultural difference framework it is postulated to occur because the conventional school environment does not contain the proper cues to effectively elicit such behaviors from minority children (e.g., McDermott, 1974). Some workers suggest that the school environment is so inimical to minority children that they may actively rebel and refuse to do what is asked of them by the school, in a show of hostility toward teachers or the system (e.g., Rosenfeld, 1971), or in a perhaps not-altogether-unconscious attempt to preserve their own cultural indetity and dignity (e.g., Howard, 1973). The Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), as discussed in this conference by Jordan, has trained teachers to shape the classroom environment in ways that are conducive to a willing engagment with school tasks on the part of Hawaiian children, although that outcome proved to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective learning.

Cognition

Explanations having to do with culturally-derived differences in cognition are increasingly popular among psychologists, but encounter problems of the difficulty of measuring cognition and differences in cognitive operations across cultures or even across situations. There is the matter of task specificity of cognitive operations, already discussed. There is the difficulty of measuring cognitive characteristics. As a further complexity, one can view the problems of minority students as due to differences in organization of cognitive operations (e.g., Cole & Scribner, 1974); that is, pupils may fail to learn because their cognitive operations, though adequate, are organized in systems which do not mesh well with the way the school presents information.

A further tension exists in issues of cognitive training: Will the performance of the pupil be improved by formal cognitive training as Ann Brown (in press) and others have suggested? Or is it necessary, instead, to only engage or elicit, by changes of context, the appropriate cognitive processes, which are assumed to already be present and well-developed? Furthermore, would the teaching behaviors generated by those two hypotheses be, in fact, any different?

In my opinion, effective innovations in the cognitive area are difficult to separate conceptually from innovations generated by sociolinguistic hypotheses, to which we now turn.

Language Issues

Two kinds of explanations can be included in this category. One is that of actual **code interference.** That is, failure to learn may occur because material is presented in a school, or "standard" code (i.e., language or dialect), which is unfamiliar to the student. He may not understand the code well enough to absorb the content, while his teacher may not understand the student's first language or dialect well enough to recognize and be able to mobilize his real academic potential; or there may be interference between specific features of the two codes which produce learning difficulties, especially in reading. The recent bi-cultural, bi-lingual impetus in education (e.g., Torres-Trueba, 1976) has grown partially out of these concerns.

The other variety of explanation involving language is sociolinguistic. Even if teacher and pupil share the same language code (and to a greater degree, if each is **not** at ease in the other's code), it may well be that the ways in which they use that code, the particular social circumstances of speech and the paralinguistic acts surrounding it, are sufficiently different that effective communication is hampered. Sociolinguistic explanations emphasize social circumstances of speech acts and the ways that language is used in interaction. These vary wildly from one cultural group to another. Laura Lein (1975), for example, points out how differences in sociolinguistic rules result in mutual misinterpretations by teachers and Black American immigrant children; and Boggs (1972) has reported similar phenomena for Hawaiian children and their teachers. Courtney Cazden (1977), among others, has emphasized the great difficulty of even evaluating the linguistic repertoire of minority children, because of misfits between the sociolinguistic parameters of school and conventional testing situations, on the one hand, and those of the settings in which such children will produce the full range of language performance, on the other.

The failure of schools to fully engage the cognitive and linguistic capacities of minority children is a source of consternation to educators as well as social scientists; and sociolinguistic analyses are more and more looked to for solutions.

Social Organization of the Classroom and of the Teaching Process

Even within the trans-national school culture, there are a variety of classroom social organizations possible, ranging from that symbolized by the traditional self-contained ranks and files of desks, through small-group formats, to individual tutorial systems, and to the radical "free-school" minimum-organization style. Social organizations willy-nilly emphasize different interaction styles--competition or cooperation, individualization or group-linking, personal or impersonal teacher relationships, formality or informality of teaching style, peer-peer or student-teacher relationships--which in turn, implicate cultural norms. Incongruencies between preferred types of social interactions, and even social norm conflicts, can result from classroom social organization which is alien to the child's culture.

Although this kind of hypothesis is not common among educators, or even recipient-culture parents, it is of interest and concern to the cross-cultural social scientist, and a number of workers have placed major responsibility for cross-cultural educational problems on misfits in this area. Frederick Erikson (1977), for example, has argued that social interactional "styles" of being a student and being a teacher need to be matched with each other for satisfactory educational achievement. Rosen (1977), although he sees social interaction issues in the classroom as ultimately stemming from the social class divisions of society as a whole (a "political" explanation), advocates change of the social organization *within* a classroom and school as at least a partial solution. Cazden and John (1971), among others, cite "discontinuities" between instructional methods and American Indian children's customary learning interaction styles and suggest the instructional processes could be better adapted to that style.

Socio-political Issues

In this last category of explanation is the attribution of educational problems in cross-cultural circumstances to the structure of the larger society and the relationship of minority or subordinate groups to the dominant group which controls the educational institutions. Eleanor Leacock (1971), for example, has given some support to this position as an outcome of a comparative study of Black and White low-and middle-income schools, while Thomas and Wahrhaftig, in the same volume (1971) come to a similar conclusion from work with Cherokee Indian and folk Anglo-Saxon populations.

Proponents of political explanations often see solutions to cross-cultural educational problems as resulting only from changes in the larger society, or at least necessitating a drastic reorganization of the total school system. While they may concede that the immediate problems that minority and subordinate group children experience in school can be due to factors included in any of the other five categories, solutions to these problems cannot be reached, these theorists feel, by changes which are confined to the classroom alone. Only by alterations in the larger socio-political frame can effective and lasting educational change be produced.

Researchers in cross-cultural education must recognize the reality of socio-political issues. However, educational research and political action are separate spheres of activity with different ways of proceeding. and the researcher must most often attack classroom issues directly, in the hope that making the trans-national culture of the school operate more effectively for minority students will go to the root issue of political discontent. In my view, social scientists, humanists and educators have quite enough to manage in solving the practical problems of making education truly responsive to the differences among cultures.

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